

Is There A Fire In The House?

Fire is frightening. Believe me I've been there. And once you've been there you and your nose will never forget. You can sniff out a puff of smoke at a thousand metres. "Can anyone smell smoke?" you ask your friends. Usually they cannot. But the little smoke detector on the front of your face is twitching like crazy — your friends think a bee has climbed up one of your nostrils. And you can't settle down until you have discovered the source of smoke.

Fifteen years ago I was on a ship. We were sailing out of Sydney Harbour. The engine room caught fire. We stopped sailing out of Sydney Harbour. Great billows of black smoke poured out of the stack. People go crazy in situations like this — some take charge, others fall apart, some run for the nearest exit. Me, I'm no hero and panic set in. I'm on a ship, it has live ammunition, lots of fuel — and it has its fair share of bozos. (*Bozo: a clown, not too intelligent.*)

My fear was that one of these bozos might be taking charge of the fire-fighting operation. My fears were unfounded as some capable people put the fire out within 30 minutes. Later it was revealed that built up fuel had ignited, and a great jet of blazing fire had spewed out the smoke stack. Luckily nobody was seriously hurt. But from that day forth I've had a healthy fear of fire. *Twitch, twitch.*

Ten years ago I was staying in a luxurious one-star hotel in Chiang Mai (the only reason it got one star was because the star was painted on the front of the hotel). We booked three rooms, and decided to take a nap before dinner. Suddenly, I woke up. My nose was twitching; there was smoke in the air. I looked out the window. Nothing. I woke my friends who assured me there was no smoke and that I must be dreaming. I walked the passageways. Nothing. Yes, it must be an old war wound playing up — perhaps I was dreaming of my old ship. I returned to rest. Fifteen minutes later my nose sounded an alarm: there was smoke. I rang reception, who sent the 13-year-old fire-fighter and security guard to investigate. I roused my friends and told them there was smoke, and that we were now on a mission to find the source. They looked bewildered, but agreed. With the adolescent fire-fighter and my team we combed the building. At this stage they must have thought I was a nut. We found nothing, and as a last resort I commanded the chief fire-fighter to take us to the roof. We all visited the roof.

Peering seven floors down I noticed a puff of smoke on the second level. It actually looked like a steam pipe. Once I mentioned it looked like steam my friends all agreed it was steam and wanted to return to the comfort of their rooms. I suggested we double check from the vacant lot next door just to be sure. Reluctantly they agreed. The fire-fighter also agreed; I think he was frightened of me. From the vacant lot we could see smoke. My heart started to pound. The smoke was

coming from the cracks around the window pane. We all ran to the second level. I dispatched the chief fire-fighter to get an extinguisher and reinforcements. I had a surge of adrenaline.

Arriving at the room in question we observed smoke pouring out from under the door. The chief fire-fighter and his team arrived looking bemused. He told me they didn't have a key to get in and would have to go and get one. Please wait was their command.

With a cry that would put a sergeant-major to shame, I screamed: "Kick the \$%%\$## door in, man." The staff shook. The staff looked. The staff kicked. (In hindsight I don't know if it was the right thing to do, but it worked.) Smoke spewed out. There was a cough from inside. A man fell out on to the balcony. One minute later another man. The smoke escaped quickly — there seemed to be no fire.

I ran in and opened the window. There was fire. Only a little one. It was a portable gas stove. And on top was a little pot. The pot was now a strange white colour.

Later that day the hotel manager held an investigation. The two men were holidaying from India and had returned to the room after a very, very late night. In fact, it was early afternoon when they returned. They were very drunk but hungry, and decided to boil some eggs. The little portable stove was positioned in the middle of the floor. A pot of water and eggs were placed on the stove. It was lit. They fell asleep. The water had evaporated, the eggs had long since left this world, and the pot was at a point of no return.

The manager also told me he had learned a valuable lesson and was contacting the local fire-brigade to arrange fire-fighting instruction for his staff.

The next day I saw the two men who we saved from the smoky room. They were sober and embarrassed. I gave one man my card hoping he was a millionaire and on his return to India reward me with precious jewels and gifts. My business card said I was a copywriter in an advertising agency. He looked at it, and in a very heavy Indian accent asked, "Are you a fortune teller."

I enclosed his hand with both my hands and shook them. Looking him in the eye and nodding, I replied, "Yes." He noticed my nose twitching. He looked at his friend. They both looked at me. I said, "Excuse me, I have a fire to attend to." *Twitch, twitch.*



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